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ABSTRACT

This digest briefly describes key components for building a local school-to-work (STW) partnership and discusses the rural context for implementing such an initiative. The School-To-Work Opportunities Act of 1994 established a national framework for each state to create STW systems that are part of comprehensive education reform, are integrated with systems developed under Goals 2000, and offer opportunities for all students to earn portable credentials in a performance-based education and training program. States applying for federal incentive implementation grants must include plans to serve rural communities and to allocate subgrants to local STW partnerships. Local partnerships consisting of employers; educators; students; and representatives of local education agencies, postsecondary institutions, and labor organizations must implement programs that provide work-based learning, school-based career learning, and connecting activities. The context of rural STW programs may include persistent poverty, informal arrangements between employer and employees, remote location, or dependency on a single industry. Some parents and community leaders fear that STW programs will actually undermine local economic development by training students to leave their communities. However, the ultimate success of STW partnerships may be in giving rural students a better understanding of the rural place in which they live, and may someday work. (Contains 14 references.) (SV)

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**ERIC
DIGEST**

Building School-to-Work Systems in Rural America

Hobart Harmon

THIS Digest briefly describes the key components for building a local school-to-work partnership and discusses the rural context for implementing such an initiative. Local school-to-work partnerships have an important opportunity to reconnect rural students, teachers, and schools with their communities.

Background

The national education reform movement of the 1980s helped prepare America's youth for work and for making career choices. The reforms enlightened people about the rapidly changing skills required in the American labor market and the effectiveness of school-to-career systems of other advanced democracies (Mendel, 1994). Reports such as *Learning and Living: A Blueprint for High Performance* (SCANS, 1992) and *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages?* (National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990) accelerated interest in linking education to economic competitiveness and the employability of individual citizens. On May 4, 1994, Congress responded by passing Public Law 103-239 [H.R. 2884], the *School-To-Work Opportunities (STWO) Act of 1994*. The STWO Act was the first federal legislation to declare that preparing *all* students, including the college bound, to earn a living is one of the legitimate and important roles of schooling (Halperin, 1994).

The act established a national framework for each state to create school-to-work opportunities systems that (1) are part of comprehensive education reform, (2) are integrated with the systems developed under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, and (3) offer opportunities for all students to participate in a performance-based education and training program. Under this framework, all students will be able to earn *portable* credentials; prepare for their first jobs in high-skill, high-wage careers; and pursue further education.

Implementation Grants to States and Local Partnerships

At the time of this writing, 39 states have been awarded federal incentive implementation grants for building a school-to-work opportunities system. To obtain a 5-year implementation grant, governors must submit applications that include a plan describing how their state will serve rural students in communities with low population densities. States must explain how federal grant funds will be allocated as subgrants to local school-to-work partnerships. States are required to use at least 70 percent of the funds for subgrants the first year of the grant, at least 80 percent the second year, and at least 90 percent in years three through five.

Local school-to-work partnerships must consist of employers; representatives of local education agencies and postsecondary institutions (including vocational education schools where they exist); area school teachers, counselors, or principals; representatives of labor organizations or other nonmanagement employees; students; and others. The local partnership's plan must agree with the state plan and must include a special compact that details the responsibilities and expectations of students, parents, employers, and schools.

Local partnerships are charged with implementing programs that have three key components: (1) work-based learning, (2) school-based learning, and (3) connecting activities. *School-based learning* focuses on career exploration and counseling, student selection of a career major, a program of study based on high academic and skill standards, a program of instruction that integrates academic and vocational learning, scheduled evaluations of students' academic strengths and weaknesses, and procedures that facilitate student participation in additional training or postsecondary education. *Work-based learning* is a planned program of job training or experiences, paid-work experience, workplace mentoring, and instruction in general workplace competencies and all aspects of an industry. *Connecting activities* include matching students with work-based learning opportunities; providing a school site mentor to act as a liaison for the student; providing technical assistance and services to employers or others in designing school-based learning activities; training teachers, mentors, and counselors; integrating academic and occupational education; linking program participants with community services; collecting and analyzing information regarding program outcomes; and linking youth-development activities with employer and industry strategies for upgrading workers' skills.

Local Partnerships and the Rural Context

Local partnerships in high poverty urban and rural areas may apply directly to the National School-To-Work Office for implementation grants. In fiscal years 1994-1997, 86 such local partnership grants were awarded (29 to rural grantees). Funding these partnerships in rural areas supports an important component of the nation's school-to-work system. More than 45 percent of the nation's schools and 50 percent of the local school districts are located in rural areas and small towns (Harmon, 1997). Across the United States these communities have experienced high levels of economic distress. Nearly 1 in 5 rural residents lives in poverty totaling almost 10 million people. More than 500 rural counties have had *persistently* high rates of poverty for the past 50 years, and some of these counties have higher poverty rates than the worst inner-city slums. Most of these people are defined as the working poor—because at least one family member is employed (Summers & Sherman 1997).

Rural and urban labor markets differ substantially. Rural workers on average have less education and training and are more attached to their community of residence than their urban counterparts. And the terms of agreement between rural employers and employees may be more informal; for example, rural employers are more likely to allow workers to consume some products without paying for them. (Summers, Horton & Gringeri, 1995).

While many rural counties have struggled economically during the past several decades, others have experienced job growth. During the 1980s, rural economic winners—those with above-average annual growth in both employment and income—were retirement counties (25%), trade center-

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(35%), and manufacturing-dependent counties (20%). While 45 percent of the counties that made economic gains were located next to metropolitan areas, nearly two-thirds of the counties that suffered losses were far from any urban area. Thus, remoteness, a defining characteristic of many rural places, is an economic liability unless favorable scenery or climate can attract retirees, tourists, or entrepreneurs.

Aggravating the situation, most rural employed people are in natural-resource (e.g., coal mining) or low-wage, low-skill manufacturing jobs, all of which are vulnerable to layoffs. Rural areas are more likely to be dominated by and dependent on a single industry, thus increasing worker vulnerability. The need for rural economic development is clear, especially in remote areas and regions in decline. Most observers agree that schools have a role to play in fostering such development. The School-to-Work Opportunities Act, designed to give individual students portable skills, may also boost local economic efforts.

Implications for Rural Education

Fitzgerald (1995) maintains, "If it is not linked to education reform and skills enhancement, economic development can at best attract the same kind of low-end employment that has come to dominate many rural economies" (p. 437). However, it requires more than increasing the education levels of rural people to attract high-wage, high-skill jobs. Fitzgerald's research reveals there is often a negative relationship between education and economic development. Under these circumstances, educational investment pays off only for the rural students willing to migrate to areas that offer higher paying jobs.

In many rural areas, available jobs remain low skill, routine, and unrewarding. Yet employers expect employees to have highly developed dispositional or social skills such as "self-motivation, collaborative skills, 'sweet spirit,' personality, good communication, and work ethic" (Danzis, 1996, p. 33). Imagining positive outcomes for school-to-work programs within this context can be difficult and discouraging. Moreover, some parents and community leaders believe school-to-work initiatives actually undermine local economic development by training students to leave the area, taking with them valuable skills gained in their towns and schools.

D. R. Reynolds (1995) argues that first and foremost among rural education policy issues is "what relationship should exist between local communities and the larger society and how this relationship should find expression in the school" (p. 477). Developing consensus about this relationship requires a discussion among the same players specified in the school-to-work legislation. Examining program purposes is a good first step toward fostering a closer relationship between schools and their rural communities. Once people have agreed on the relationship between their program purposes and local economy, they are in a better position to address other challenges: low teacher expectations for student achievement, cultural discontinuity between the school and the community, family influences, inadequate career counseling, inappropriate teacher education, limited transportation, and scarce workplace-learning opportunities for students in the community (Harmon, 1996).

Engaging youth to develop a "sense of place" in their communities has not been a strong theme in recent decades. This is substantiated by a study of rural youth aspirations (Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996) and a 21-state study by six of the regional educational laboratories comparing aspirations of rural high school students with expectations of their parents and school staff (Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996). Results reveal a clear preference for good occupational opportunities over involvement in creating and maintaining a strong community. In the study by the regional educational laboratories, rural youth ranked strong community attributes—community leadership, stewardship for the land, family connections, civic

affairs, social responsibility, voluntary service, and close friendships—in the bottom half of factors they considered important to their future. The authors conclude that for rural youth, concerns for personal careers and economic success overshadow concerns for community well-being and involvement; and that for teachers, these trends are even stronger.

Conclusions

Some may see the school-to-work system benefitting only the individual student and potential employer. Yet, the ultimate success of school-to-work partnerships might be in connecting students to their community and future work by giving them a better understanding of the rural place in which they live—and may someday work (for examples of how this was done in three remote rural communities, see Miller & Hahn, 1997).

Can the school-to-work movement help rural youth and teachers regain their sense of local community? Can integration of school- and work-based learning enable parents and business, religious, and civic leaders to develop closer relationships between their rural values and the values promoted by the education system? A rural school-to-work opportunities system is more likely to be successful if it involves the community to set goals, utilizes the community as a learning laboratory, engages students in meaningful service-learning activities, creates school-based enterprises and other entrepreneurial initiatives tied to local economic needs, practices community-based career guidance, and embraces parents as equal partners. A school-to-work system without these features may be viewed as yet another mandated *urban project* with great potential to weaken further the essential relationship between schools and their communities in rural America.

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